

**News & Observer**, January 31, 2008

**Miller fumes about FEMA, formaldehyde**

Submitted by Michelle Valenzuela

U.S. Rep. Brad Miller has accused the Federal Emergency Management Agency of hiding and manipulating science on the harmful effects of a chemical used in trailers after Hurricane Katrina.

Miller, a Raleigh Democrat, said FEMA got the scientific results it wanted only after skeptical scientists were excluded from the studies at the emergency management agency's behest, Barb Barrett reports.

A House science oversight panel, which Miller chairs, has discovered e-mail exchanges between officials in FEMA and a public health agency indicating that studies on formaldehyde were steered in a direction that would have downplayed the chemical's dangers.

Formaldehyde is used in the particle board of travel trailers, such as the tens of thousands used by FEMA to house homeless families in the wakes of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, which slammed the Gulf Coast in 2005. More than 40,000 families still live in the trailers.

More after the jump.

According to the e-mails, FEMA agents last year sought a study from the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, a division of the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta. Following news reports about the dangers of formaldehyde, FEMA wanted scientists to study short-term exposure to the chemical.

At the time, a top agency scientist warned FEMA's general counsel that there is "no safe level" of exposure to formaldehyde.

"Failure to communicate this issue is misleading, and a threat to public health," the scientist warned.

Nonetheless, the e-mails show that FEMA went around the concerned scientist and directed the health agency not to study long-term health effects of the chemical, Miller said.

"Long-term" is defined by federal safety agencies as anything longer than 14 days.

The toxic substances agency agreed to study only short-term effects of the chemical. It wasn't until a separate House oversight hearing last July that FEMA followed up with a study on long-term impacts.

***"Federal government agencies should not be deciding what they want the answer to be,"*** Miller said Tuesday.

***"They obviously knew there were health risks."***

FEMA denied any wrongdoing Tuesday in a statement on its Web site.

"FEMA has not and will not attempt to, nor will it condone any effort to, suppress or inappropriately influence any report from the Center for Disease Control's Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry," the statement read.

Miller is considering holding hearings on the issue, but for now he is waiting for answers from two top officials on the matter.

He and U.S. Rep. Nick Lampson of Texas, who chairs another subcommittee, wrote letters this week to U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff, whose agency oversees FEMA, and to Howard Frumkin, head of the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.